

Choosing Smart Risks & Managing Them Wisely

Why go this route?

- Substantive improvement in student achievement will involve risk-taking because something fundamental needs to change. Choosing those risks wisely increases your chance of success...and being smart about it increases your chance of survival.
- Teachers will take risks in the classroom (where instructional change has to happen) only if they see deliberate, smart risk-taking modeled by the building leader.
- Life is too short to live it as a harassed victim. Making your own decisions about what needs to be done, and going after what you need will create the conditions under which you can succeed. Nothing less is worth investing your life in, and we can often get more than we think, if we “work smart.”

You'll know you've arrived when...

- You can identify the risky parts of pursuing your school's vision.
- You know who you trust and who agrees with your vision.
- You have strategies for approaching those you need, regardless of the degree of trust and agreement you share.
- You know how and when you'll act entrepreneurially in support of your vision.

Construction Zone

This packet is designed to help school leaders (principal or leadership team) through a “gut-check” to help ensure that—whatever strategies for improvement you choose—you do so with your eyes open to the potential costs and pitfalls ahead. The process inside is essentially a reflective one. The more honestly and explicitly you face the difficulties on the “hill you've decided to die on,” the more matter-of-factly you can plan to minimize resistance, mobilize allies and choose your battles.



It's about TIME

- You could work through this entire process in a half-day of reflective reading and writing.




Potential COSTS

- Not really financial—just the built-in emotional and mental costs of looking at oneself and the decisions one makes more honestly than we often take time to do.

The Process

*A step-by-step guide to
choosing and managing risk.*

NOTE: Steps marked with a  are accompanied by one or more inserts, included in this packet.

1 Be clear about your vision.

Smart risks are taken in support of your internally-driven vision. Ideally, this matches a shared vision owned by colleagues too. See packet 2:1 “Holding a Shared Vision Steady” for a process for articulating a school-wide shared vision.

2 Reflect on—and stretch—how “entrepreneurial” you’re willing to be in service of your vision.

Read our summary of Peter Block’s chapter from The Empowered Manager in INSERT for Step 2. What Block describes as “entrepreneurial” leadership is critical to turning schools around, but is very hard for us when we’ve grown up professionally in “bureaucratic” organizations like schools. It involves putting ourselves on the line. Be candid with yourself about how much you’re willing to stretch on behalf of your vision and your students.

3 Assess the strategies involved in your vision for their risk factors.

Is each one good policy? Is it good politics? Concentrate first on those that are high on both. Those that get “low” on either one pose higher risks—and require clear thinking about how to proceed. Use steps 4-6 to increase chances of success. INSERT for Step 3 offers a worksheet.

4 Name people from whom you need something to succeed with a strategy.

Think through specific strategies involved in your vision, and identify people you need to take action if you are to succeed. Some might be inside the building; others might be at the district or community levels. Jot their names on the INSERT for Step 4.

5 Choose your best approach to each person.

Start by thinking about your relationship to each person. Use the grid on the bottom of Step 4’s worksheet to locate each person on the Trust and Agreement axes. Locate each name where it belongs on both axes. Then read INSERT for Step 5 (an excerpt from Peter Block’s The Empowered Manager) to consider a recommendation for how to approach each person, based on your assessment.

6 Consider whether you can earn good will on behalf of your vision.

Read Steven Covey’s chapter on emotional bank accounts from Seven Habits of Successful People. How might you “invest in” someone else’s vision and become a part of his/her team, so that your vision fits in with theirs? Or consider whether you might already have done so and could now ask for reciprocal support.

7 Consider telling staff about this story.

Disclosing your own experiences and learnings as you prepare to take risks on behalf of the vision might be inspiring for staff to hear, if you are comfortable sharing.

8 Consider hiring a “coach” to help you think carefully about your risks.

Investing in your own success as a leader might be the best thing you could do for your kids. See the Michigan Department of Education MI Excel website for a listing of experienced, state trained and approved coaches who see their work as supporting and building leadership capacity, not pushing any particular strategy or reform approach. http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,1607,7-140-6530_30334-103288--,00.html

Getting more mileage from choosing smart risks

How reflecting carefully about your risk-taking benefits your school in regard to the following initiatives:

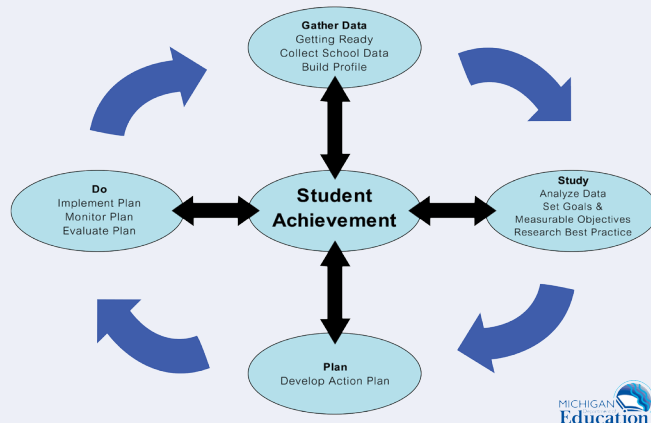
Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

- ESEA requires high priority schools to develop new school improvement plans that range from changing curricula and instruction to closing a school. If teachers and principals do not take risks in abandoning things that aren't working, change is likely to be incremental and slower.
- Sanctions and rewards are tied to the school's progress in meeting ESEA achievement requirements. The principal is responsible for implementing and monitoring changes. Principals who are not able to lead their schools toward improvement are subject to decreasing authority and/or removal.

State Accreditation System

- A school is required to carefully analyze their practices to ensure that all students are successful as required by ESEA. This will put staff "out of the box" requiring that big risks resulting in change are necessary.

Michigan Continuous School Improvement Process (Mi-CSI) **Michigan School Improvement Framework**



The Michigan Continuous School Improvement Process leads staff through a process of analyzing and comparing their goals to data. It assists them in identifying barriers, content specialists, site visitations, and research that can strengthen their approach. This reflective analysis might contribute to that thinking... or conversely, the work done by that team might offer insight to a leader's own analysis using this packet.



Resources

Books, Articles, Websites

Seven Habits of Highly Effective People

Steven Covey. New York: Simon & Schuster Fireside, 1990.

Twenty-five years of experience, thought and research have convinced Covey that seven habits distinguish the happy, healthy and successful from those who fail. The equivalent of an entire library of success literature is found in this one volume.

The Empowered Manager

Peter Block. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987.

Still the best book on brave, smart leadership which many of us have found. Practical, political strategies you can use.

The Leadership Challenge, 4th Edition

James Kouzes and Barry Posner. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007.

This guidebook is about moving from management to leadership. Chapter 4 specifically deals with risk-taking and learning from mistakes and successes.

Learning Forward (National Staff Development Council)

www.learningforward.org

A search for “risk-taking” will yield a list of rich articles and publications.

People

Intermediate School Districts/RESAs can serve as a resource.

For more information, contact:

Michigan Department of Education

Office of Education
Improvement and Innovation
517-241-3147

School Improvement Unit
517-373-8480

Curriculum and Instruction Unit
517-241-4285

Office of Assessment
and Accountability
517-373-0048

Office of Early Childhood
and Family Services
517-241-3592

Office of Field Services
517-373-3921

Office of Professional Preparation
and Teacher Certification
517-373-6505

Office of Special Education
and Early Intervention Services
517-373-9433

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